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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PI, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: NDI PROMOTES DEMOCRATIZATION THROUGH ACTIVITIES IN
BAHRAIN

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) is making great strides in bringing MPs, oppositionists, and civil society activists together to find common ground on cutting-edge political issues, thereby strengthening the democratic process and institutions in Bahrain. NDI organized a "summit" of political societies April 12 intended to address the most prominent democracy-related issues facing the country. It teamed with the Bahrain Transparency Society April 14 to review and seek endorsement of regulations governing the electoral system. It will host a conference on April 21 to address interpretations of the article of the constitution addressing procedures for the advancement of legislation. NDI is praised by almost all sectors of Bahraini society, from the King to the most prominent oppositionists. The sensitive issues NDI is working on will only increase in prominence as the country approaches municipal and parliamentary elections in the fall of 2006.
End Summary.

"Summit" brings political society leaders together

2. (SBU) MEPI-funded NDI, in the presence of visiting NDI Senior Associate and Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa Les Campbell, organized an April 12 political "summit" to which all 16 political societies in Bahrain were invited. Eleven societies participated, mostly those from the opposition. The results of the summit were modest: participants agreed to form a committee to prepare an agenda for a follow-on conference focusing on the "national dialogue," a phrase used to refer to the dispute over the legitimacy of the 2002 constitution. No joint statement was issued by participants, but the overall tone of the summit was positive. It was the largest gathering of political societies since the 2002 parliamentary elections.

Common ground on election-related issues

3. (SBU) The Bahrain Transparency Society and NDI co-hosted an event April 14 that brought together members of both the lower Council of Representatives (COR) and upper Shura Council, and representatives of the major political societies to discuss Bahrain's electoral system. Participants reviewed and endorsed most of the recommendations produced by the national monitoring committee that oversaw the 2002 parliamentary elections. The recommendations included forming a high commission to monitor the 2006 elections; allowing candidates to choose their constituencies without having to reside in the area; repealing the rule that required voters in 2002 to have their passports stamped at the voting station; redrawing constituency boundaries to ensure more proportionate representation; and banning religious centers and charitable funds from taking a direct role in campaigns. The recommendations will be forwarded to the Shura Council and the Council of Representatives.

A new approach to the constitution

4. (C) On April 21, NDI will host a conference focusing on Article 92 of the constitution, which addresses procedures for the advancement of legislation. Many observers believe that the government retains the largest share of control over the legislative process. For example, the COR has the right to introduce revisions and amendments to draft legislation produced by the government, but the government can wait up to two legislative sessions (two years) to respond to the COR's revisions. In the event that the COR votes against a draft law and the Shura Council votes in favor, the government can

convene a joint session and subject the legislation to a straight majority vote involving the 40 COR and 40 Shura members. In such a case, the law will almost certainly pass as all Shura Council members are appointed by the government. NDI's conference will bring together members of the COR and Shura Council, legal experts, and representatives of most political societies (including the boycotting societies) to discuss this issue and how to move forward. NDI country director Fawzi Guleid told PolOff that the forum will encourage all sides to "think creatively about how to deal with the constitutional debate."

Royal Court supports NDI

15. (C) In late March, MP Mohammed Khalid from the Al Menbar (Muslim Brotherhood) bloc complained that NDI was interfering in Bahrain's domestic affairs and requested that Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar investigate NDI's legal status in the kingdom. Guleid met with Abdul Ghaffar and representatives of the King's royal court and received assurances that the GOB fully supports the NDI presence in Bahrain. Al Menbar President Dr. Salah Ali, noting that Al Menbar members participate in NDI events, told EmbOff that he and others in the society disagreed with Khalid's stance on NDI. MFA Assistant Under Secretary for Coordination and Follow-Up Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told PolEcon chief April 13 that the MFA had decided to serve as the Bahraini institution sponsoring NDI to head off any further challenges to NDI's legal status in country. Independent newspaper Al Wasat reported April 14, citing "credible sources," that the King intended to give an award to NDI in appreciation for its contributions in support of reforms in the country.

16. (U) Widely read and respected Al Wasat columnist Abbas BuSafwan April 16 praised NDI's work in Bahrain. He said that NDI has included all political factions in its activities, whether pro-government or oppositionist. He admires the "different way of thinking" that NDI follows to discuss the priority national issues, including the debate over the constitution.

NDI plays effective role in Bahrain

17. (C) NDI began working in Bahrain in March 2002 with the aim of strengthening Bahraini political and civil society institutions in order for them to play a positive and meaningful role in Bahrain's new democracy. Since then, NDI has provided technical assistance to political societies and has advised parliamentarians on how to work effectively within the system. It has also made great strides in bringing MPs and oppositionists together to work on various issues of concern to Bahrain's people. Guleid, the only NDI staff member permanently in country, has gained the trust of political actors from the King's royal court to the most hardline oppositionists. All active political societies, with the exception of Al Tajomo' Al Qowmi (Baathi), regularly participate in NDI events. NDI has a very active schedule of events, including the three conferences this month.

Comment

18. (C) NDI's activities strengthen Bahrain's new democratic process and institutions by helping prominent Bahraini actors, including from the government and opposition, address potentially explosive political issues in a low-key, technical manner. These issues are at the core of ensuring the success of Bahrain's still young democratic reform process -- equal representation in parliament, political participation by all sectors of society, balancing the powers of the elected and appointed legislative bodies, among others. NDI is guiding a process in which Bahrainis from all sides discuss ways to move forward and create positive change. With municipal and parliamentary elections set for 2006, the issues NDI is addressing will only increase in prominence.

MONROE